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ABSTRACT

Changing workplace demands have made postsecondary learning essential for almost all workers. The age of universal access to postsecondary training has arrived, and students are taking advantage of the opportunities expanded access has to offer. Anticipated growth in the demand for postsecondary training and the need to acquire certain skills quickly, coupled with the ability to enroll an almost unlimited number of students in virtual classes, will become increasingly important to students seeking rapid matriculation into the workforce and workers seeking skill maintenance or upgrading. While traditional four-year postsecondary institutions will continue to attract and enroll students directly out of high school, the majority of workers will pass through institutions focused less on degrees and more on competencies, skills enhancement, and training conveniently offered, in terms of both time and location. As the nation's population centers move from the industrialized Northeast and upper-Midwest to the South and West, community colleges and private-for-profit institutions have expanded quickly into these areas. State college systems and private postsecondary institutions have opened satellite campuses in these high-growth areas. Distance education is quickly becoming essential to expanding educational access. It has led to the development of the virtual university. Private training companies and major corporations provide online training to individuals, postsecondary institutions, and companies. (YLB)

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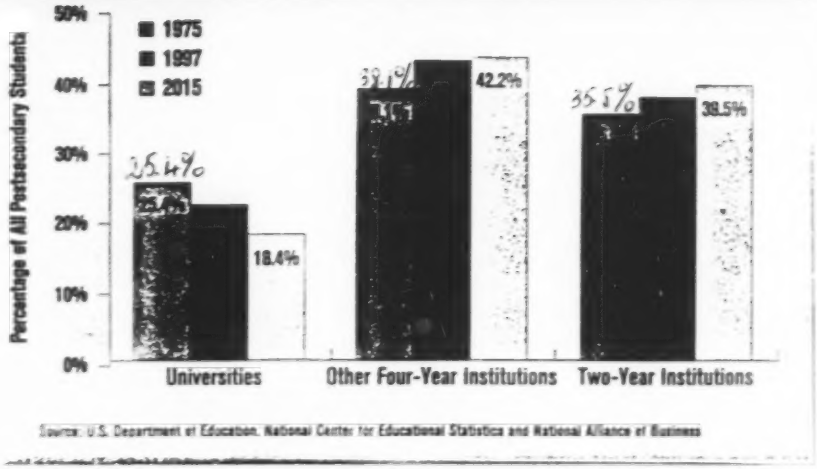
Postsecondary Learning for Everyone

The changing demands of the workplace have made postsecondary learning essential for almost all workers. The operative word here is "learning" — the outcome and the means to facilitate learning through short-term training that leads to a certificate or degree. Employers increasingly need workers with specific technical and managerial skills, and they need them quickly. This is straining the more established higher educational institutions' ability to deliver and altering the perception of what postsecondary education really is.

Over the last 25 years, enrollment growth at public and private four-year universities has lagged behind the growth at all other postsecondary institutions. The share of students enrolling in public and private universities will shrink from 25 percent in 1975 to 18 percent by 2015, while those in two-year colleges will grow from 36 percent to 40 percent of the total undergraduate enrollment over the same period (Figure 1).

Additionally, the growth in postsecondary enrollment is not composed exclusively of high school seniors. Technology, competition and the economic growth they have fostered mean that workers need continually higher levels of skill and knowledge. As a result, the number of workers enrolling in postsecondary institutions has been climbing steadily. Since 1991, the percentage of workers with postsecondary experience who engage in some form of continuing education has risen from roughly 47 percent to 57 percent. Additionally, 59 percent or more of all workers with a degree now engage in continuing education (Figure 2).

Figure 1: Enrollment Distribution at Postsecondary Institutions by Type of Institution, 1975-2015 (projected)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics and National Alliance of Business

More Skills Faster

Employers need workers who can gain work-applicable knowledge quickly. While the traditional bachelor's degree is and will remain vital for many professions, the four-year institution is not the choice for many of the fastest growing jobs, especially in the high-tech industry. Community and private career colleges are enrolling an increasing proportion of high school graduates and older workers seeking additional skills training. More experienced workers are engaging in lifelong learning in record numbers as they take advantage of a growing supply of short programs awarding certificates and associate's degrees. In fact, nearly half of all students enrolled in community colleges in noncredit courses already have a certificate or degree

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from a two-year or four-year postsecondary institution (Figure 3). Similarly, 20 percent of students enrolled in for-credit subbaccalaureate programs previously have earned postsecondary degrees, according to *Vocational Education in the United States: Towards the Year 2000*, a report by the National Center for Education Statistics.

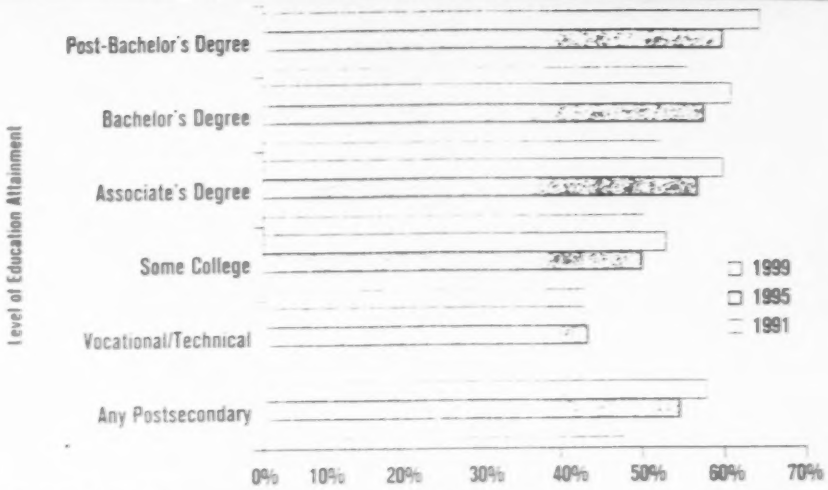
Beyond the Ivy

While some private and public universities maintain high levels of competitiveness for undergraduate admissions, the sheer volume of students entering postsecondary institutions makes it impossible for these schools to admit every qualified applicant. Many students who would otherwise attend a highly competitive and selective university instead are earning degrees at alternative postsecondary institutions. The result: University enrollments as a percentage of postsecondary enrollments are declining.

Community colleges, private career colleges, online and distance education, and facilities at public and private institutions throughout the country have grown in response to this heightened demand for postsecondary training. The emergence of these educational institutions as primary sources of training has been a catalyst in changing the postsecondary landscape, with attendance at postsecondary institutions rising by 28 percent since 1975. The proportion of high school seniors enrolling in a postsecondary institution immediately after graduation has increased as well, from less than one-half in 1979 to two-thirds by 1997. It likely will reach 75 percent within the next decade (Figure 4). Put simply, more students are enrolling in postsecondary education than ever before.

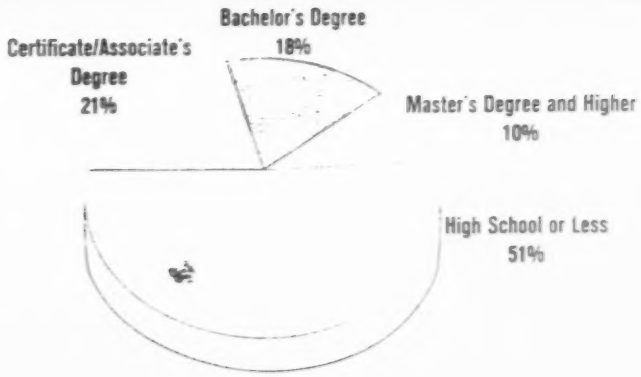
But the continuing demand for education will exert mounting pressure on traditional institutions to provide facilities and access. While some institutions are building satellite campuses or expanding existing facilities, others are leasing downtown office space to accommodate all students, and the percent of part-time faculty has increased steadily in recent years. These measures provide short-term fixes to the problem of limited capacity, but they do not

Figure 2: Percentage of Adults Participating in Continuing Education by Level of Education Already Attained, 1991–99



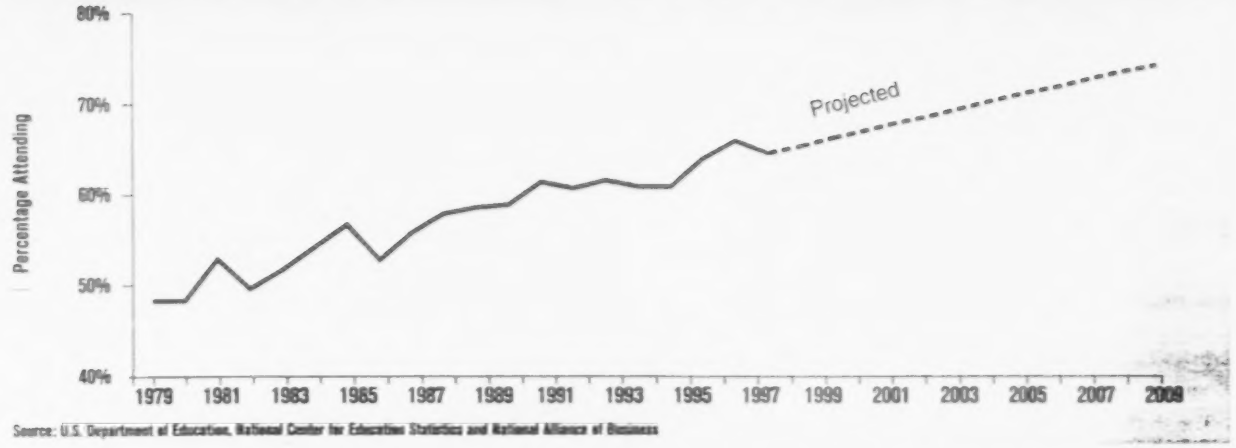
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

Figure 3: Distribution of Students Enrolled in Noncredit Courses in Community Colleges by Level of Educational Attainment, 1999



Source: American Association of Community Colleges

Figure 4: Percentage of High School Graduates Attending College Upon Graduation, 1979–2009



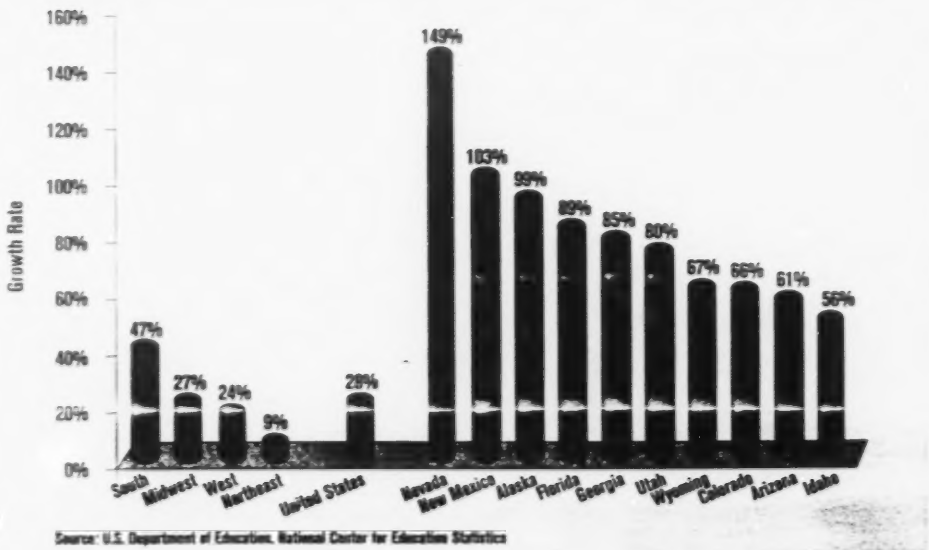
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics and National Alliance of Business

address the issue of continuous growth and access. The emergence of distance learning and online courses provides a tangible and growing option for long-term expansion of the postsecondary system.

Distance and online education allow institutions to increase enrollments, not just for on-campus students, but for students and workers located anywhere they have access to a computer and the Internet, including their homes. Additionally, instructors can deliver programs to many more students virtually than they can via in-person lectures. This has begun to transform the way postsecondary education is delivered, and the emergence of the virtual university points to unlimited access for all students and workers.

Specifically, this all means that higher education is evolving into a less-structured environment that provides more user-centered, customized forms of training. Students increasingly will pick and choose among programs targeting specific skills, which allow them quicker entry into the workforce, then cycle back again and again to upgrade those skills and acquire new ones. While all postsecondary institutions will experience continued growth, those institutions that respond the fastest to the increasing demand will see the largest enrollment gains. Additionally, the demand to continually train workers will accelerate enrollments in shorter, more customized programs created for them and in the institutions that supply these programs.

Figure 5: Postsecondary Enrollment Growth in the United States, Regions and Fast-Growing States, 1975–97



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

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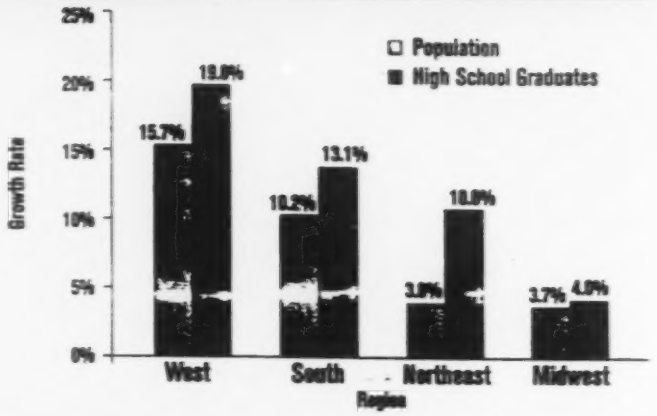
Continental Shift

Internal migration and increased immigration have caused another type of demographic shift in the United States, which also has contributed to the demand for better access to postsecondary education. The nation's population centers are moving away from the industrialized sections of the Northeast and upper Midwest to the South and West, and projections indicate that this pattern will continue for some time to come. The population surge has meant a dramatic increase in the school age population as well, and enrollments at postsecondary institutions in these areas have swelled. Of the 13 states where postsecondary enrollment grew by 50 percent or more between 1975 and 1997, eight are in the West, and four are in the South (Figure 5).

Figure 6: Projected Growth in Population and High School Graduates by Region, 2000–10



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics and U.S. Census Bureau

Both population projections and potential high school graduation figures for these regions indicate that postsecondary enrollments will grow for at least the next decade (Figure 6). Community colleges and private for-profit institutions have expanded quickly into these areas in response to the demand.

Additionally, state college systems and some private postsecondary institutions have opened satellite campuses in these high-growth areas, further expanding access to higher education. The arrival of distance education has been an important component in providing access to postsecondary training, giving workers and students convenient access to programs offering curriculum and training in locations where traditional postsecondary institutions still may be less accessible.

Distance Education and Postsecondary Delivery

Distance education, while not new, is quickly becoming essential to expanding educational access. Since 1994, the proportion of students enrolled in distance education courses at colleges and universities has grown from 5.3 percent to 16.6 percent. By 2009, roughly one in three postsecondary students will be enrolled in distance education.

Distance education also has led to the development of the virtual university. Several postsecondary institutions, such as Jones International University and Western Governors University, offer only online courses, while others deliver a major portion of their curriculum online. Some, like the University of Phoenix, are developing national programs targeted at professionals seeking to continue their education without suspending their careers. Students can participate either online or in a more traditional classroom setting. Likewise, private training companies, as well as major corporations such as Cisco Systems and Microsoft, provide online training to individuals, postsecondary institutions and companies. These programs offer alternative opportunities for credentialling and skills enhancement, as well as a resource for timely educational delivery on a specific subject or skill. Distance education will become an indispensable tool for employers and workers.

In short, the age of universal access to postsecondary training has arrived, and students are taking advantage of the opportunities expanded access has to offer. The anticipated growth in the demand for postsecondary training and the need to acquire certain skills quickly, coupled with the ability to enroll an almost unlimited number of students in virtual classes, will become increasingly important to students seeking rapid matriculation into the workforce and to workers looking to maintain or upgrade skills. While the more established, traditional four-year postsecondary institutions will continue to attract and enroll primarily students directly out of high school, the majority of workers will pass through institutions focused more on competencies, skills enhancement and training conveniently offered, in terms of both time and location, and less on degrees.

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The National Alliance of Business is a national business organization focused solely on increasing student achievement and improving the competitiveness of the workforce. The Alliance's members include CEOs and senior executives of Fortune 500 companies, educators, and business-led coalitions. Together, the Alliance and its members are leading efforts to strengthen the link between education and the workplace and promote training and lifelong learning.

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The Real Whirled. In a creative move away from traditional classroom training, Whirlpool is giving new marketing hires a dose of "reality-based training," according to *The New York Times*. Trainees spend two months living together in a house equipped with Whirlpool dishwashers, refrigerators, washers, dryers and other appliances. They put the equipment through the same daily use (and abuse) as ordinary consumers do — and learn to market to customers in the process. Apparently Whirlpool discovered that cooking and cleaning are not among the skills mastered by recent college graduates.

Pay Gap Closing. The wage gap between women and men, stalled since the mid-1990s, is expected to narrow in the coming years, reports *Business Week*, citing a study published this fall by Cornell University economists Francine Blau and Lawrence Kahn. In 1999, women with full-time jobs earned 76.5 cents for every dollar men earned, compared to 61 cents in 1974. The reason? Women's skills and on-the-job experience are catching up to those of men, after a pause in these factors in the last decade.

Vanishing Executives. Within the next five years, some companies — particularly larger, established firms — will bid adieu to 40 percent to 50 percent of their top executives as they retire, according to data from Development Dimensions International, a consulting firm, in *Training* magazine. This may leave companies in the lurch and in need of new leadership.

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